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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/10/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PM  
SUBJECT: PANAMA: ARCHBISHOP TOUCHES UPON POLITICAL ISSUES  
IN SERMON

Classified By: POLCOUNS BRIAN NARANJO. REASONS: 1.4 (D).

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SUMMARY  
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**¶1. (C)**  
"The excessive cost of political campaigns is a slap in the face to the poor," Archbishop Jose Dimas Cedeno, stated during his sermon at the 38th Eucharist mass on June 1st, 2008. Cedeno underscored key political issues deterring Panama's progress, and urged the Panamanian government and private sector to address: i) the growing income gap, ii) the healthcare crisis, iii) the corrupt judicial system, iv) and the soaring cost of political campaigns. Additionally, he also proposed an immediate increase in minimum wage and overhaul of the judicial and health care system. The Archbishop's remarks were well received by the public. The only one to attend the mass, PRD presidential candidate Balbina Herrera, agreeing with the Archbishop, promptly issued a press statement that called for a "cap on campaign spending". Conversely, her opponent Juan Carlos Navarro justified his high campaign costs, noting that such expenses were necessary to educate effectively the public.

End Summary.

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Highlights of the Sermon  
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**¶2. (U)** The following are key highlights from the Archbishop's sermon:

--"Economic prosperity benefits the minority, while excluding the majority."-- The GOP and private sector, Cedeno asserted, should raise minimum wage salaries to help the country's working class. Panama's economic growth continued to benefit a small percentage of the population that enjoyed access to material wealth, while the working class majority suffered from the rising cost of gas, increased standard of living expenses, and high inflation rates.

--"The increasing presence of bars and casinos generates violence in the community."-- Panama's incredible economic growth led to a proliferation of nightclubs and casinos, further fueling alcohol abuse, poverty, and crime in the community, the Archbishop stated. Women were the most vulnerable to these social dynamics, since they carried the burden to support the family.

--"Eradicating corruption and impunity is the country's most urgent task."-- Presidential candidates had to immediately address corruption, impunity, and the broken judicial system, according to Cedeno. Political parties should also reduce

wasteful spending on political campaigns fueled with empty propaganda. Candidates had to present concrete plans to improve the country.

--"The majority of the population lacks access to quality healthcare."-- GOP and private enterprise had to initiate a collaborative effort to fix the healthcare system that lacked the infrastructure to provide service to all citizens, Cedeno said.

--"Public Transportation maintains our country's development and growth."-- The economy could not operate effectively without an efficient public transit system. The community depended on it to survive, Cedeno asserted. GOP should address the concerns of taxi and bus drivers that suffered from the increasing cost of gas.

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Leading Catholic NGO Echoes Archbishop's Remarks  
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¶3. (SBU) The essence of the Archbishop's remarks were echoed in a meeting between POLOFF and Maribel Jean, Executive Director of the Justice and Peace Commission, a Catholic NGO. She described the role of the church in the upcoming elections as ensuring a clean vote through election observation, education of the public about their duties as citizens, and highlighting corruption as a societal ill. She too said the Church supported a "just salary" that would cover the costs of housing, food, education, and healthcare, though she put no dollar figure on what a "just" minimum salary would be.

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Comment  
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¶4. (C) COMMENT: The Archbishop's sermon addressed many of the top issues affecting the country on voters' minds: the economy, security, transportation, and health care. Public approval of his message underscores the importance of the Archbishops' non-partisan voice on political matters, one of the few such voices in Panama. Many Panamanians would like the Archbishop to be more vocal. Cedeno's last sermon was six months ago in December. POL is reaching out to Cedeno and hopes to delve into his views in greater depth in the coming weeks. END COMMENT

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